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SUBJECT: KUMARATUNGA VISIT: SRI LANKA RELATIONSHIP A  
"MODEL" IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

REF: COLOMBO 1857

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt. Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

11. (C) Summary: Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga's November 3-7 New Delhi visit highlighted that Sri Lanka has become a model neighbor for India. The President's stay included an address to a high-level conference during which she dismissed the notion that "nothing was happening" in her country's peace process. The MEA announced the long-pending Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) was ready for signature, but did not indicate when that would be signed. Officially, New Delhi has kept its hands off of GOSL-LTTE relations but the DCA will reverse that stance, Indian Tamils argue. In attempting to restrict third party use of Sri Lanka's Palaly airfield that the GOI has agreed to refurbish, India is pursuing its objective of being the dominant South Asian power. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Despite keeping her VIP audience waiting nearly 30 minutes, Kumaratunga's November 5 speech to the high-powered "Hindustan Times" leadership conference was well received by the Delhi elite. Kumaratunga avoided any mention of the conflict in her own country, focusing instead on her vision for SAARC which she said could unify South Asia into an "economic powerhouse." Following the talk, the President dismissed the suggestion that "nothing was happening" in the peace process, and instead highlighted recent developments that gave her cause for optimism.

#### Model Relationship

13. (C) The MEA told us that "nothing new" came up during Kumaratunga's GOI discussions. In a November 17 conversation with Poloff, Deputy Secretary (Sri Lanka) Anupam Rai called India-Sri Lanka "one relationship in the neighborhood that is really moving," adding that "politically, we are closer than ever." Rai remarked that "the Sri Lanka relationship could serve as a model for our other relationships in the neighborhood." Emphasizing the contrast between Colombo and India's other neighbors, he noted that "as opposed to building barriers, like Bangladesh and Pakistan, Sri Lankans are the only guys who are walking the talk of building strong ties." In a statement after the Kumaratunga visit, the MEA also expressed pleasure at "Sri Lanka's endorsement of India's candidature for permanent membership of the UNSC."

#### Defense Agreement

14. (C) Describing the long-awaited India-Sri Lanka Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) as an "international safety net," Rai remarked simply that its purpose was to "institutionalize defense cooperation." Indo-Asian News Service News Editor (and Prabhakaran biographer) Narayan Swamy explained that the agreement provided the only surprise of Kumaratunga's visit, as she was expected to sign it while in New Delhi. Swamy explained that the LTTE opposes such a formalization between India and Sri Lanka because it would "redistribute the equilibrium between the Tigers and the GOSL." Freelance commentator Maj. Gen. Ashok Mehta (Ret) agreed, noting that the LTTE have said such an agreement will go against the peace process. He added that the DCA will be a "deterrent" to the LTTE from continuing to pursue a military course.

15. (C) As to the status of the DCA, Sri Lankan High Commission First Secretary Saj Mendis (protect) told Poloff that the documents are being prepared for signature. General Mehta gave us a different view, observing that the agreement still had to be approved by the Indian cabinet, and predicting that the process may not go smoothly due to resistance from South Indian Tamil parties in the governing coalition. Institute for Conflict Management (ICM) researcher Saji Cherian noted recently that the leader of the pro-LTTE MDMK party, Vaiko, had met with PM Manmohan Singh to "express his disapproval." Journalist Swamy asserted that the LTTE position would not dissuade the GOI from finalizing the process.

#### Hands Off, Eyes Open

16. (C) The GOI maintains that "any request for Indian participation in the peace process would have to be

considered carefully." According to the MEA's Rai, Kumaratunga described the process as "neither going forward, or backward." The GOI has concluded that the President is "serious" about moving ahead, and that India is willing to finance rehabilitation projects in Sri Lanka, Rai added.

17. (C) Among India's development projects in Sri Lanka, Swamy listed the GOI offer to refurbish the Palaly airstrip (reftel), but noted that New Delhi has conditioned its offer by requiring that only India and Sri Lanka be allowed to use it. Although the LTTE is concerned that the DCA will bring Colombo and New Delhi into a military relationship against them, Prabhakaran biographer Swamy insisted that the GOI would not contemplate a repeat of its 1987 military intervention in Sri Lanka. In a November 23 essay, General Mehta came to the same conclusion, writing that "India is still once bitten twice shy." Nonetheless, the ICM's Cherian noted that since September both the head of India's Navy Admiral Arun Prakash, and the Chief of Army Staff N.C. Vij have traveled to Sri Lanka.

Comment  
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18. (C) Sri Lanka has become a "feel good" relationship for India and the gushing public embrace Delhi gave Kumaratunga stands out among visits from the other neighbors. The DCA demonstrates that India is not entirely content to stand by quietly on GOSL-LTTE relations. The Palaly airfield agreement is a GOI attempt to wield even greater influence in Colombo. Undergirding this rapidly thickening security/political agenda is a thriving commercial relationship that both sides see as beneficial. As much as anything, it is this mutually advantageous economic arrangement that distinguishes India's relationship with Sri Lanka from its other South Asian ties.  
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